

Merav Hoffman:

Welcome to the All-of-a-Kind Podcast! I'm Merav Hoffman.

Batya Wittenberg:

I'm Batya Wittenberg.

Merav:

We loved these books when we were kids. We love them now and we hope that you do too.

Batya:

Today's chapter is the one where the girls get scarlet fever right before Passover.

Merav:

So this is maybe the heart of the book, just a huge chapter. So in ones and twos, Mama's girls come down with the dreaded scarlet fever in the week leading up to the festival of Passover or *Pesach* as it's called in Hebrew.

The house is quarantined and no one can go in or out by order of the Board of Health.

Mama works frantically playing nurse to the girls and making preparations for Passover as the number of helpers dwindles, losing first Sarah, then Ella, and then both Charlotte and Gertie. Thankfully, the family support system is in place and visitors and helpers supply the family with gifts and groceries. And the girls are even able to participate a little in the Passover rituals from their sick room. Eventually the quarantine is lifted, much to everyone's relief.

Today we have two guests with us. We have Shoshana Flax and we have Rena Mills. They are cousins and Rena has an especially special connection to All-of-a-Kind Family. So I'm going to let them introduce themselves, starting with Shoshana.

Shoshana Flax:

Hi, I'm Shoshana Flax. I'm an associate editor at *The Horn Book*, which does reviews and other contents about books for young people. And these books, the All-of-a-Kind Family books, just keep coming up in my life. It was the first chapter book that I read on my own. My mom and I were reading it together. And then she went up to take care of my sister, and I sneakily continued reading, re-read it many times.

To use Dr. Rudim Sims' Bishops book terms; I think I really saw these as a mirror book, I saw myself reflected. I thought it was really cool that they were also a window book for other kids that other kids needed to see, or were interested in seeing something that I already knew. So that's my childhood connection as well as the family connection that I'll let Rena talk more about. I also served on the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee as an adult, which chooses books for young people that

authentically portray the Jewish experience. And I also was involved in creating the “Which All the Kind Family Sibling Are You?” quiz on Buzzfeed, which was a lot of fun. And it will be no surprise to anyone who knows me that I'm a Sarah.

Batya:

I have not heard of that quiz. I should find it.

Merav:

I took it. I think I'm an Ella. I forget. It might be a Sarah, but –

Batya:

That tracks.

Merav:

– they share a bed. So it's probably roughly right.

Batya:

I'm making a bet with myself that I am either a Henny or a Charlotte, but I'm not sure which.

Merav:

I'm not sure which either. It's going to be a draw.

Shoshana:

A lot of the most fun people are Hennies I feel like.

Merav:

And we're going to introduce, also, Rena. Rena, tell us about yourself and your connection.

Rena Mills:

I'm Rena Mills. I am Shoshana's cousin. Her grandmother was my aunt and she worked at Camp Cejwin, which I attended for eight years and she got a lot of her nieces and nephews and her own two sons to go to Cejwin and also a lot of extended family members of our

synagogues where we belong. They also went to Cejwin. So she was very instrumental in a lot of campers going there.

And coincidentally, Syd Taylor, called Aunt Syd, worked at Cejwin for many years. And when I was a camper, the summer I was 10 and 11. She was the drama and dance instructor and we didn't know at first that she was also an author, but I think later on we found out while we were there that she was the author of the All-of-a-Kind books. And I read those books. I read a few of them. I think the later ones were published later on and we thought it was incredible that she was there, just happy, you know, happy to know her.

Merav:

That's amazing. What years were you at Cejwin?

Rena:

1967 I started on and off through '76. And I was a camper for a few years and then a counselor for two years.

Merav:

Were you in any of Syd Taylor's famous plays?

Rena:

I think I was, yes. I think we did that, but she didn't only do plays. She did a lot of improvisational stuff. You would have liked her classes where all the students were involved, everybody. It wasn't just like she'd select a few kids to be in a play – where she would give us things, scenes to act out. Everybody got to know her. Then she had an assistant who would play the piano and she was an interesting character. Let's just put it that way.

We all really loved her. She was very, very strict. She didn't put up with any nonsense. Everybody behaved in her classes, her events.

She also did dance with us. So we'd have a lot of circle dances with her and she'd have all different ages. So, you know, she would gear it to the age that she was working with. She was very talented in that way. And then at night she would go around to the different bunks and she'd come and visit.

If she chose your bunk that night. It was like, it's very exciting. And then every, well, the girls, all wanted her to sit on their bed. She would tell stories. And it was just, she sat by the foot of your bed and you know, that was like the highlight.

Merav:

That's amazing. And interestingly, I—

Batya:

That sounds so delightful.

Merav:

– I just learned this week that the people who started Camp Ramah actually were Cejwin alumni. And there's a tradition at Camp Ramah where people come and tell you bedtime stories in your cabin at night and sit on your bed.

So I think Aunt Syd started that. I think it's literally a Sydney Taylor tradition.

Batya:

It must have been!

Merav:

And that that's been lost; and I would love to tell the Ramah people, “hey guys, this was started by Sydney Taylor.” Cejwin really inspired Ramah. So I think it's notable that that tradition lives on.

So we're going to dive in – into our main program, which is “what's on the page” and

Batya:

And “what's not on the page.”

Merav:

This is where we go through the book and we talk about the literary conventions and what happened in real life versus what happens on the page. But we don't always have great insight into real life. Today we have Rena, so maybe she can offer us some insights there.

And of course, as always, our guests are going to jump in with us and discuss the chapter.

Our first question is always, “who do we meet in this chapter?” And I think the main one is Dr. Fuchs.

Batya:

Dr. Fuchs, I think is – the first person you could call a major character that we haven't met yet. I love him. He's great.

Shoshana:

He has a great sense of humor.

Batya:

I love a doctor who makes a point of amusing his child patients and trying to make people laugh so they'll feel a little better about whatever's going on. I'm a big fan of that particular bedside manner. Granted, it isn't always suited to the patient, but I like it.

Rena:

And something you don't see today is he made house calls.

Shoshana:

Daily!

Rena:

Nobody does that now.

Merav:

I do have one doctor who will call me after hours, which is already a *mechaya*, right? Like, that doesn't happen today.

Batya:

Big thing, yeah.

Merav:

But he's there every day, right? The girls are sick, they're staying in the house, they're quarantined. The doctor is still coming every day. So that's above and beyond for what we expect from a doctor now.

Rena:

I'm sure he had a lot of patients, so he probably had to make a lot of different house calls – visit a lot of different homes.

Merav:

I expect it was an epidemic at that point.

Rena:

Yes.

Merav:

They have the Board of Health showing up really promptly to quarantine them. There's probably a lot of that activity going on.

Shoshana:

I wonder what measures he was even taking. I mean, I hope that he was wearing gloves and washing his hands from one house to another because that is a way to possibly spread scarlet fever.

Merav:

I kind of wonder, you know, he's looking in their mouths. Is he using a different stick for each girl – I hope? Charlotte and Gertie don't catch it for like almost three to five days after we see Ella and Sarah come down with it. So I'm a little worried about the disease vector there.

Rena:

And I'm sure he wasn't wearing a mask.

Merav:

No, definitely not.

Batya:

Certainly not a mask of the kind we would consider absolute requirements today. We're all much more versed in what is a good medical mask than we were this time four years ago, I think.

Merav:

Or indeed when we read the books.

Batya:

Or indeed when we read the books, yes.

Rena:

And hygiene.

Batya:

Good hygiene. This is not so far back in history that doctors hadn't yet adopted hand washing as a health measure. There was a period where doctors were actively resisting hand washing as a health measure, which boggles the mind today, but was a thing. That was further ago, further ago, longer ago?

Merav:

Longer ago?

Batya:

– longer ago than this. Dr. Fuchs is no doubt washing his hands to the best of his ability.

Merav:

I do think it's interesting that we don't get any hand washing in this chapter. Mama changes her apron at one point. She's in the sick room, she's in her apron, she takes off the apron.

Batya:

That's true, yeah.

Merav:

Puts it down and doesn't say, and then she went and washed her hands.

Rena:

The only hand washing they talk about is before the *Seder*.

Batya:

Is at the *Seder*, you're right, where it's ritual hand washing.

Merav:

It's good that we have these rituals because they're there to protect us. For those that don't know in the audience, ritual hand washing – we're going to discuss this when we get to the *Seder* portion – but ritual hand washing is a big part of Jewish daily life.

Batya:

And it is specifically a thing prior to meals.

Merav:

But also when you wake up in the morning.

Batya:

Also with, yes.

Merav:

A lot of people do the morning hand washing and some people have a special cup that they keep by their sink for that purpose.

There's so much Judaism in this chapter.

Batya:

Yes, "Is there Judaism?" is a classic question.

Shoshana:

A little bit!

Batya:

It would be nothing but except that there's scarlet fever in the house, which kind of steals the spotlight for a bit, but not for long. Passover or *Pesach* is, I think it's definitely a candidate for the most important holiday in the Jewish calendar.

Merav:

In fact, it used to be the New Year at one point. Before we moved the calendar around, Passover was the beginning of the New Year because it's the beginning of spring. It's also one of the three festivals that required pilgrimage to Jerusalem when the temple was standing. So that's another factor in how important it is from a religious perspective. And from a practical perspective, getting the house ready for Passover, as we see in the chapter, is an enormous task. A lot of it is just elided because Mama is busy taking care of the girls

and we get much more description of her loving care of the girls than we do of her preparation for Passover, which must have been kind of frenetic.

Shoshana:

We definitely do get the sense that Passover is a production, even in normal times, if her kids had been healthy, she already would have had all this work, just it is the annual stress event.

Rena:

And I can't even imagine her getting all this done while taking care of sick children. I mean, she must be totally overwhelmed and yet she keeps calm throughout the whole time and doesn't get flustered and upset, keeps calm. I'm sure she's worried about her children and she wants to take care of them and get them better. But at the same time, she has so much else to do to get ready for the holiday.

Batya:

It's very clear to me, that – just from the text – that Mama feels it important to running the household smoothly and to keeping the kids on an even keel while they are convalescing. She's got to hold it together, she's got to present an unruffled and in-control appearance, no matter how worried and stressed she is, and she is extremely worried and stressed.

The thing that struck me on this rereading is just how much of an understatement the chapter title is. The chapter is titled, Mama Has Her Hands Full. I'm like, Mama has her hands full on a regular basis. Mama's daily life is having her hands full. This is on another level.

Merav:

This is full arms at this point. It's not just the hands.

Rena:

It's an understatement for sure.

Batya:

Very much so.

Merav:

And Mama very much suppresses the anxiety. Like we see her interior monologue “oh, my goodness, how am going to do this? They're going to need to be on this special diet. They have all of these requirements for scarlet fever. How am I going to bring this into harmony with Passover?” And then she's just very calmly discoursing with the doctor, with her children, completely rearranging the house. And she's just, you know, casually like, “all right, I am going to do logistics in my brain and then I'm going to get it done.”

Shoshana:

And the kids are oblivious.

Rena:

And she's not getting sleep. She's not sleeping at the same time.

Batya:

Right!

Rena:

She's constantly taking care of them. They're having nightmares. I don't know how she's functioning on little sleep.

Shoshana:

Yes!

Merav:

It's a good question. I think she's just doing it on sheer adrenaline.

Batya:

I think so. And sheer force of will, which we have already seen. Mama is a very, very strong willed woman.

Merav:
Absolutely.

Batya:
And that is serving her well here because she hasn't got much recourse, except it's either hold it together or fall to pieces and still have all this to do anyway. Because even though people are helping, and I do want to talk about how people are helping as we go on, there's nobody else can do the job of “sleep in the room with the kids to be there if one of them has a nightmare.” Papa could do it, but Papa's got to work outside the house also.

Merav:
I find that fascinating that Papa is actually leaving the house to work, and I think it was

mostly because scarlet fever was regarded as a kid's disease, and he's not coming in contact with kids. He doesn't have underage peddlers.

Batya:

But the quarantine does not keep him at home.

Rena:

Yeah, he could be spreading the germs to other people while he's out.

Merav:

We genuinely don't know. This is probably what happened because he has to go out and make a living. I don't think people really understood what quarantine meant in those days so much as, you know, "don't come in."

Rena:

He can't work remotely.

Merav:

Charlie seems to be the only one who gets it, right? Like, Charlie's like – “I'll just stand over here and leave the package by the door. Don't come close.”

Batya:

And yes, Charlie is back in this chapter.

Merav:

Yes, and very active.

Batya:

Let's talk about that. He's determined to help not just with practical needs, but with keeping the kids' spirits up. He keeps fretting that he can't do enough and brushing aside every time Mama tells him, “you're being so much help, you're doing so much good” and he's like, “oh, it's nothing.”

Merav:

Yeah, he's actually embarrassed, I think. He like runs off down the stairs like, "oh, no! Don't thank me!" which is adorable. But it's also very – we're setting up Charlie's character here as a good man who would be very good with children.

Shoshana:

He's a good man who wants a family too, I think we're seeing a bit of that.

Batya:

Yes!

Merav:

Exactly, and given what we find out next chapter, spoiler, things are going to happen.

Batya:

That's right. That is next chapter, isn't it?

Merav:

That is next chapter. At a certain point we just want to get a sense of the roundedness of Charlie's character. I think that we're sort-of building it into the narrative here.

Transition sound

Merav:

Interior space versus exterior space is a big one in this chapter. The exterior, we're getting nameless aunts and uncles. We don't get any identities yet as far as who's visiting. We know them from the *Purim* chapter, but we're not getting, oh, Uncle Hyman came one day and Aunt Rivka came the other day. Everybody's coming on a schedule to wave to Mama and say, "do you need anything?" from the window; remember, they're on the second floor, looking down from the front room, they're talking into the street, which is obviously not very private, but it's at least safe. These are mostly people who have children.

Shoshana:

I definitely was struck by the contrast between the COVID pandemic, which I kept thinking back to this chapter during the COVID pandemic, because I learned the word quarantine from this chapter, as I'm sure many of us did, but during the COVID pandemic, not that many of my friends live in walk or certainly my family live in walking distance. So window visits were not a major part of my COVID pandemic.

But seeing people in little squares like we're doing on this podcast right now, I did plenty of, and I did lots of texting and I did lots of talking on the phone. And meanwhile, obviously, other than – I guess there's a phone at Papa's Junk Shop. The Brenners did not have a phone at home, I don't think. But they had this close-knit community and their family who could come to the window or could drop off packages, or they

had Charlie who could drop off a package and then scurry away.

Batya:

Yeah. And a thing that struck me is they're on a friendly basis with the grocer, and he is bringing packages of food that I don't know how they've ordered them, have they sent messages? Is this on credit? Are they paying him later or did they send someone with money? But he is himself bringing food packages to their door. I think that's great.

Merav:

Because he cares about them. And even if the piano music comes through the ceiling, he cares about the little girls who come and shop in his store. He can probably tell that Mama is having a hard time.

Rena:

It was like Fresh Direct back in those days.

Merav:

Right, early grocery delivery.

Rena:

Yeah.

Transition sound

Batya:

American culture I want to talk about a little bit because there is The Board of Health is a thing. They do not decide oh well we'd better quarantine. There are laws, there are rules, there are people who come to fumigate the apartment when everyone's better again. I don't know what was involved in fumigating the apartment, but I don't think that gets done today generally.

Merav:

No.

I don't think the earliest, but some early attempts at government involvement in public health, which is not something that I really paid much attention to in this chapter in previous years. But of course, the COVID pandemic has made me reevaluate everything that touches on this even slightly. I'm going to get to that later when we talk about the *seder*.

That we have general understanding of what it means when a household has to be quarantined. Nobody is asking “Quarantine; what's up with that?” And nobody is complaining about it. It is a rule.

Merav:

And both the Brenner parents are rule followers.

Batya:

Very much so. Now I know from elsewhere that in the flu epidemic, which hasn't happened yet, that comes into a later book, there were people, there were scofflaws who said, "no, I don't think that these rules make any sense. I don't have to follow them. I don't like them." And just as we had in the last couple of years, we have mask wearers and mask not-wearers and a great deal of conflict between them.

Great little political cartoon I saw some while ago from that period of somebody punching a non-mask wearer in the face saying, "if you won't do it for health then do it to cover the black eye."

laughter

Batya:

That's probably not a good thing to do in real life but I can feel the wish fulfillment across the century between.

Merav:

You're the one that wrote the punching song.

Batya:

That's true but that was about a different thing.

Merav

That's fair.

Absolutely. The city is getting involved and this is I think the first time we've seen the city come to the home. We've seen the girls go to the city. We've seen the girls go out in the neighborhood and into the library. But this is the first time that it's coming to the home because it has to come to the home because they're not leaving. Everything has to come to them in this chapter.

Rena:

And we don't know about what's going on with their school, if other kids in the school got sick

and couldn't go. And also if anyone is bringing them their schoolwork, y'know they're losing all this time.

Batya:

That's true. That's not touched on.

Shoshana:

They're having a great time in the sick room, so maybe they are on a break.

Merav:

Yeah, I suspect.

Rena:

They're not doing homeschooling or remote learning. We know that for sure.

Batya:

Oh, but Charlie brings them a toy blackboard and chalk. And Sarah's like, "I miss school so much, and now we can write on the blackboard,

just like in school.” And that suggests they are not getting any homework sent home, because otherwise she would have that to consider.

Rena:

Right.

Merav:

Sarah's very upset about not being able to go to school like right at the beginning of the chapter she's like, “Oh Henny I wish you were sick instead of me!” and Henny's like “I want to be sick.” She's like “Fine, you be sick, I'll go to school.” There's two chapters in a row with Sarah crying so I feel like a lot of the inspiration for this was drawn out of the traumas of childhood. “What was memorable?” “I was crying.”

Batya:

That does tend to stick. Yeah and then later in the chapter Henny gets her wish she doesn't

have to go to school but she can't do anything fun either so monkey's paw Henny!

Shoshana:

But they get to feel like they're important. Like they definitely have this sense that quarantine makes you special. And I think there's even a line about "the kids in school will think I'm important", which I didn't quite understand why that was because they're not going to be seeing the kids in school and it will be old news by the time they get back to school.

Rena:

Yeah, and they don't even know if other kids are sick.

Merav:

Right. No, there's no news network from the school. Like we have the neighbor network. We have Charlie from Papa's shop. We don't have

anybody from school coming along and saying hello, possibly because they're all sick in bed.

Batya:

I mean, very possibly, but yeah, you're right. There is an adult news network being passed around. There doesn't seem to be a kids' news network.

Merav:

Maybe there was in real life, but all we're really getting is sort-of the top level.

Batya:

But on the page there isn't one.

Merav:

Exactly. So like we don't have Tilly standing at the window yelling up to Henny about what's happening at school.

Batya:

Man, I would have liked to have seen that though,

Merav:

Yeah, absolutely. I think that would have been cool, but maybe it just didn't happen. Maybe all the kids were sick at the same time.

Batya:

This chapter is already so crowded –

Merav:

It's a huge chapter.

Batya:

I cannot fault a decision to leave that out if that was a thing that happened in real life.

Merav:

Absolutely.

Rena:

That reminds me of in Cejwin, if somebody was sick in the infirmary, then the rest of the kids in the bunk would come and visit, be outside, from below, and communicating with the one who was sick that way and from the window.

Batya:

That is a lovely thing because being sick is so often so upsettingly isolating and the girls have their sisters here and that's something nobody is sick by herself.

Merav:

Sarah is at first.

Batya:

But even while she is the only one sick, Gertie is still there even if she is not as much help as she would like to be. Gertie, trying so hard to keep Sarah amused and Sarah is just too sick to play along.

Merav:

Probably the vector for Charlotte and Gertie getting sick later is that she's playing with Sarah.

Batya:

Very possible.

Merav:

And then that's the infection vector because they don't sleep in the same bed. So she gets it then, it sits in her body for a couple of days. She sleeps in the bed with Charlotte and then boom, the two of them get sick because we didn't really get isolation yet. That's probably why that happened.

Rena:

And Henny never gets sick. So she gets to play nurse to all of them.

Shoshana:

Whether she wants to or not.

Merav:

Henny gets to play errand girl. Henny is running back and forth. There's three different things that Mama has Henny do, where she has her go and get the medicine, go to Papa's store and summon him, go and get Dr. Fuchs. She's – she's running all over the neighborhood, which probably isn't great because we don't know yet whether Henny is sick.

Rena:

And I wonder if she's the one that goes to the store to order the groceries.

Batya:

Especially since the store is really is just right downstairs. Henny, despite them trying to keep her out of the sick room, keeps coming into it. And Dr. Fuchs eventually says, “no, if she was going to get it, she would have by now.”

Merav:

Henny seems to be immune.

What you were saying before about fumigating reminds me of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, a book we haven't really brought up before. For those that don't know the story, the main character is a little boy. The main character is really the rabbit, but his little boy, the person who plays with him because the Velveteen Rabbit is a stuffed toy, gets scarlet fever. And at the end of the book, climatically, big spoiler, they're going to burn all his toys and blankets that he had while he was sick, including his very favorite rabbit. Our protagonist is facing the flames and then some real rabbits come along and save him because he has become a real rabbit because the boy had true love for his stuffed toy. It's a very sad story. I don't recommend reading it to children. It breaks people.

It is a classic of the genre and it reminded me of this because of the scarlet fever connection.

The fumigation, I suspect, is a little bit less than what happens in *The Velveteen Rabbit*, which I think is maybe earlier. Or possibly they're just being extra cautious in *The Velveteen Rabbit*. I'm going to have to look up the date and put it in the show notes.

Batya:

They did know, even before germ theory was properly understood to any degree, they did know

people could get sick from handling things that had been handled by sick people. Sometimes, some sicknesses, not all sicknesses, they didn't know why. Burn all the things the kid had while he was sick is extreme but sound as a public health measure.

Rena:

Like in the beginning of COVID, we didn't know what was safe and what wasn't, so we like wouldn't open, wouldn't touch things that came to the house, packages or groceries we'd get. Have to be – wiped everything down.

Batya:

Groceries airlock, I remember that!

Merav:

Yup. Wiping everything down.

Batya:

Which again, since we didn't know, was a good measure. Very glad when we found out we didn't have to do that.

Shoshana:

I can imagine that being sort of a traumatic decision to make, more so in All-of-a-Kind Family than it would have been for us because

this family that has so little, you know, they're
this tiny apartment –

Batya:
Yeah!

Shoshana:
– they're living in poverty, you know, if you
happen to be sleeping under your favorite
blanket and you don't have another blanket,
that's not an easy decision to make, even if it is
the sound one.

Rena:
Yeah, they couldn't afford to get rid of things.

Batya:
Oh my gosh. I just thought Sarah was saving up
for months for a doll.

Shoshana:
You have a good point.

Merav:

Yeah.

Batya:

I'd forgotten about the doll because I don't think if it happens in the book, I don't remember it happening. Do we ever get to see Sarah triumphantly acquire the doll?

Merav:

I don't remember it.

Batya:

But how awful would it have been if she had just gotten the doll and then scarlet fever happened and the doll had to be destroyed. I've made myself sad. This isn't even in the book and I made myself sad over it.

Merav:

It's my fault. I introduced *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

Shoshana:

Or if a library book?

Merav:

– ugh!

Shoshana:

Books are so precious. If something had to happen to a library book?

Batya:

Oh God, a library book!

Merav:

Shoshana made it worse.

Shoshana:

Maybe they would have been given some grace in that situation. They would have felt horrible.

Batya:

Yes, agreed. would they do with a library book that had been exposed to scarlet fever germs?

Shoshana:

I don't know.

Batya:

I don't know what the procedure would be.

Merav:

We need an epidemiologist who is versed in this period.

Rena:

And then she'd have to pay for that one too.

Batya:

I would hope they would not make her pay for that one but – ugh.

Merav:

That would be miserable as a child. For me, really traumatic. So I definitely think that it's good that they're just fumigating the apartment and not actually burning anything. As you said, there's very little that they own and Mama, I think, handmade all of the quilts on the beds, so that would be a huge loss.

Shoshana:

And I'm sure there's stuff that they've got the parents brought over from Europe as well that's irreplaceable.

Merav:

There's a whole story about Mama losing a bunch of her furniture when Papa gets sued in the old country. I have to go back and look at the details. They get involved in a lawsuit and they like repossess some of her furniture and she has trauma for her whole life that people are going to come and take away her things because of that incident. (see show notes)

Batya:

So we've talked a great deal about what's on the page with scarlet fever. I think we ought to talk about the *seders*.

Merav:

So we have all of this run-up, Mama says, tonight is Passover. Jewish holidays for those that don't know begin in the evening and the first day is counted until the next evening. So on the first day of Passover, they'll begin in the evening with the *seder*. And the *seder* is a ceremony. *Seder* means order, which I'm assuming that Papa is following because he has the *Haggadah*. I was really interested to notice that they have a *Haggadah* that's got English in it.

Batya:

Yes!

Merav:

That's kind of great for this era. And it's got pictures.

Rena:

And with pictures too.

Merav:

Yes!

Batya:

We have so many different *haggadahs* in our house and even more in my parents' house which is now my father's house. Actually I don't know if he kept them all. I should ask him.

Merav:

We also have many *haggadahs*. We have the same tradition, even though we're from very different backgrounds. We used to have a pile of *haggadahs* on the table and everybody would take one and they would all be different.

And so you would just kind of try to follow along and then you would read all of the good bits from your *haggadah*.

Batya:

One of the things that happens very frequently at the *seder* at our house is a whole bunch of the different *haggadahs* we have have English translations.

Shoshana:

Of course!

Batya:

None of them have the same translation. That's not strictly true because we have a couple that have the same edition or were clearly drawing from the same edition, but there's always four or five different translations and I'll be like, "okay everybody, how does your Haggadah, the one you have, how does it render this phrase?" And we compare the different ways of

translating it to try to, because the *seder* is not just the order in which you do things, it is also, there's this long liturgical – it's generally framed as the Haggadah is a retelling of the story of the exodus from Egypt, but it's interesting, it doesn't really get into the retelling of what happens until you're more than halfway through the section that is the retelling, because first we gotta talk about the retelling.

Merav:
Exactly.

Batya:
And it assumes everybody already knows the story.

Merav:
And that's why it takes so long. A typical *seder* is between two to five hours long. So it really depends on your family's traditions and how

quickly you want to get to the food. So a lot of people skip a lot.

Shoshana:

And how many melodies you're arguing about because everybody wants to do the tunes they grew up with. I'm flashing back now to the *seders* that Rena and I used to – now we do – we do them with separate branches of the family, but it used to be my grandmother, who was the secretary at Cejwin, would all have them in her tiny Stuyvesant Town apartment. Dozens of us. I think we were all using the Maxwell House *haggadah*. And I can definitely remember a lot of arguing over which melody you would use.

Rena:

And we all had had the same melodies that we used year after year and the same people would be in charge of leading it too.

Shoshana:

It was very much “tradition”. Yes of course.

Batya:

Running on rails. It's always interesting to me how different groups, different families, different individuals have their *seder* run on rails to a greater or lesser degree. The way it was in my house growing up was there would always be someone wanting to talk about something new they had learned or something they had read and it would be allowed up to a point and my mother would be the one to say, “okay, save the rest of it to discuss while we're having the meal because we do want to finish on time” or “save it for tomorrow!” because there would be two *seder* nights.

Merav:

Right, exactly. So there are always two *seders* in the diaspora. In Israel, I believe there's only one *seder*.

Batya: Yes.

Merav:

This is because of (the) position of the moon. A lot of things outside of Israel are doubled or a day longer so that you have more time to make sure that you're actually observing right on the festival. And Passover is no exception. It's eight days here and I believe it's seven days in Israel. So here we have two *seders*.

They must, by custom, both finish, many people say by midnight. Some people will go until 1 a.m. but mostly it's midnight. So you have to cram a lot of liturgy and singing and eating and ritual into those hours. And you can't start before the sun sets. So you have that little window and depending on where you are in the ecological calendar, that's going to determine the length of your *seder*. And also depending on where you are on the earth.

Batya:

I believe some say it's not that the whole Seder has to be done by midnight, it's that you have to finish the meal and eat the *afikomen* by midnight, and afterwards we'll stay up till three in the morning talking about all the stuff that we skipped. We never manage because – or singing, or singing – but no, by the time we got to the actual end of the Seder, we would always be too tired to stay up longer. But I have known families that actually do go till three in the morning.

And there is a story in the Haggadah of a group of rabbis in Bnei Brak during the time of Rabbi Akiva, which was during the time of the Roman occupation, who literally stayed up all night discussing the Exodus from Egypt, It's suggested it was actually a *seder* night, until one of their students came to them and said, “Rabbis, it's time for morning prayers.”

Merav:

And it is also suggested that they were actually plotting revolution against the Romans and that that was a cover.

Batya:

Yes! You can plot revolution and talk about the Exodus at the same time.

Merav:

Why not?

Shoshana:

They're relevant to each other!

Batya:

And the reason their students had to tell them it was sunrise was they were in a cave, in hiding, and they couldn't see the sky for themselves – is one interpretation I have heard, I do not

believe this is universally agreed upon – this is Judaism; nothing is universally agreed upon.

transition noise

Batya:

This bit really got me hard on this reading where we begin the *seder* and says, “How empty and lonely the table looked with its setting for only three on this night when the poor, the friends and the relatives were wont to be the invited guests.” First *seder* during COVID, which was like only a month or so after the pandemic had started and we still didn't know what all we needed to do to keep safe. *Seders* at our house have always been huge, crammed, crowded. We need to extend the table into the living room.

And that year it was me and my husband and my mother-in-law at opposite ends of a very long table and with separate wine bottles and

other things at each end so we wouldn't have to pass things back and forth. And it was just painful. It felt so wrong. And I didn't think of this then, but I thought of then when I reread this. Yeah, I know how that feels.

Rena:
Very lonely.

Batya:
This is not how the *seder* is supposed to be.

Shoshana:
It's so interesting, though, both in our lives and in this book even with all of that going on, you still have some form of a *seder*.

Batya:
Exactly, yeah.

Shoshana:

I was the only one at my *seder*. We did a Zoom *seder* before the holiday started, but I was the only one physically present at that *seder* that year. In the book, when Charlotte asks Mama, “will we have the *seder* nights anyway?” you know, she's just gotten this news that scarlet fever is happening, and the answer, and we know that internally she's so worried, her immediate answer is, “yes, of course we'll have the *seder* nights anyway.” It's not even a question.

Batya:

You don't just not have a *seder*, even if absolutely everything about the context is wrong, you still have one.

Rena:

Yeah, you don't cancel it because of illness.

Merav:

Certainly I relate to this. I had a *seder* at 15 where I couldn't actually eat or speak because I had just had jaw surgery. And so I spent that entire *pesach* making hand gestures because we were religious and we didn't write on *yontif*, which is the part of the holiday, which is observed like the sabbath. I was basically just making hand gestures the whole first two days of Passover with my cousins who had come to visit us because it was going to be our last Passover in Canada before we moved. So I had very, very mixed feelings on that because I wanted to talk to my cousins, but it was still a really good Passover.

Shoshana:

And you still remember it really strongly now.

Merav:

Absolutely!

Shoshana:

Overall, I think that's really true of the unusual Passovers.

Merav:

Yeah. I think the ones that are different are the ones that stick out, like the one where we had the lights go out before the *seder*. We had an automatic timer. hadn't been reset from the weekday cycle because the *seder* was on a weekday and the lights went out just as we were lighting candles. That was that. We sat in the dark, we lit some more candles and we had the *seder* by candlelight.

Shoshana:

That's kind of nice once you get past how inconvenient it is.

Batya:

That is pretty cool. A pain, but also kind of cool.

Merav:

It was pretty interesting. And we definitely had that on a regular basis on Shabbat. So we were like, “all right, so the lights have gone out, we know how to handle this.”

So we have the girls and they're in the bedroom. So the way that this is set up, if you haven't read the chapter, the four girls are set up in Mama's bedroom. Mama immediately abdicates her bedroom, and she's sleeping in there, but like on a cot. You've got Charlotte and Gertie and Ella and Sarah set up in the beds, same as they would be in their own room.

Papa is sleeping on the hospital couch. And I just want to shout out to the hospital couch. It always sounded so cozy to me because it's in the kitchen. You were saying before about being sick in isolation. Your mother is right there. The nice warm stove is right there. And you're sick in the bed and the nice white sheets.

And I was like, that sounds so appealing. It's so much better than being sick in bed.

Batya:

That really does sound nice.

Merav:

There are several slightly romanticized bits of being sick in this chapter, like Ella sighing contentedly and leaning back against her pillow. It's just such a, you know, enticing, like, "ooh, that must be such a –" no, they're sick.

Shoshana:

I think Henny would agree with you.

Rena:

And it's such a tiny apartment –

Batya:

Yes!

Rena:

– but they still manage to be quarantined.

Batya:

Yes, Rena, that was another thing that struck me. “Don't let the healthy ones interact with the sick ones.” This place has two rooms! Well, three.

Rena:

Where are they supposed to all go?

Batya:

And they manage it.

Merav:

I think it's technically four rooms, but one of those rooms is the kitchen. And effectively you've got the front room.

Batya:

Right, kitchen, parlor, two bedrooms.

Merav:

Right, they're not using the front room.

Rena:

And the kitchen must be big enough to have a couch. Yeah. It must be a big kitchen.

Shoshana:

I have a delicate question. Do we know what the bathroom situation is? I mean, whatever the format took at the time.

Merav:

I think it's down the hall, but it's a good question because it's clearly not in the apartment. And that is significant given that these girls are probably walking down the hall to go to the bathroom. As we know, a bathroom is a great place to pick up disease because it's isolated and has no windows.

Batya:

They may have been using something like chamber pots that would then be carried down the hall to be emptied, which is one of the less pleasant aspects of nursing sick people.

Merav:

It's entirely possible that if they were under quarantine conditions, we don't know. And they've been too delicate to tell us, which is probably to the good. And I don't know what kind of diet they were eating on this, whatever the scarlet fever diet was. Mama says maybe it's incompatible with Passover eating.

Batya:

But we never find out what it actually is.

Merav:

Exactly.

Rena:

But they probably try to stick to Passover foods as much as possible.

Merav:

Right. Once Passover comes, and for those of you that don't know about Passover, all leavened grains. So there are five grains that are considered the grains for Passover purposes. Any of those, if they are leavened, those are not permitted on Passover, this has become a whole huge category of foods you may not eat on Passover as the laws have accreted over time. And people say, "well, those were grown near the wheat, so let's not eat those. And those resemble the wheat, so let's not eat those."

Batya:

And these are frequently packaged in the same places that packaged the wheat. And there is a subcategory called a *kitniyot*, which I think literally means legumes.

Merav:

It means small things.

Batya:

It means small –

Merav:

Katan, kitniyot.

Batya:

– is that the literal meaning?

Merav:

Little.

Batya:

Oh!

Shoshana:

That makes sense!

Batya:

I never put that together, thank you!

Merav:

You're welcome.

laughter

Batya:

That are not grains, but that category of traditions in Judaism that does not consume anything made out of them on *pesach*. And another set of traditions which says, yes, you can eat them, you just have to check through them really, really well to make sure there's no grain in them. In the present day, that checking is frequently done in a factory context, and you can just buy, for instance, rice that has been stamped kosher for passover, and you know that at the factory or at the distribution packing place, they made sure this was not going to be contaminated with any grain.

Or you just buy unmarked rice and go through it grain by grain. Families I grew up with would do this every year. You go through it grain by grain three times –

Shoshana:
Wow!

Batya:
– to make sure.

Merav:
This is what a sifter is for.

Batya:
Sifter doesn't work if the grains of rice are the same size as grains of barley, which they just about are.

Merav:

One of the wonderful things about gluten free is that you can be reasonably certain.

Batya:

Yes!

Merav

It depends because oats are often considered gluten-free. Oats are one of the forbidden grains.

Batya:

But it's a good bet that it has at least been very carefully checked to make sure nothing that isn't supposed to be in this product is in this product.

Shoshana:

All this separation reminds me so much of quarantine too, and I wonder which of those two things were being done more more carefully.

Batya:

That's a good point.

Shoshana:

You even used the word contaminated.

Batya:

Oh. Yeah!

Shoshana:

It's sort of a similar concept but keep things separate.

Merav:

Thematically they really go together and either this really happened and I don't know whether this is like something that really happened or whether they took two stories of "oh, the girls have scarlet fever" and "oh, it's Passover" and put them together because thematically they fit perfectly and it just makes such a calamity.

Shoshana:

Actually I may be able to answer that one because when my mother was visiting my father's family – which was Rena's side of the family – over Passover at Town and Village Synagogue which is where the Brenner sisters went the rabbi asked “does anyone have any Passover memories to share?” and Ella raised her hand and she began to tell a story and this was after the book was published so she began to tell this story and my mother went I know where; I know exactly where this is going. I know how this turns out. So yes, this is a true story.

transition noise

Merav:

One of the things I love is to sort-of kick-off the seder with the contamination and the separation. Their father puts on a *kittel*, which is like a white garment, an over garment that you

put over your clothes. It's actually a lot like what doctors wear, like a lab coat.

Batya:

I know someone who calls his *kittel* his sacred lab coat.

Merav:

I was just going to bring that up.

Batya:

Yup!

Merav:

I think it's the same person.

He's making physical differentiation between impure and pure, and then he goes and shows himself to his daughters to sort-of show them that they are not impure, which I just kind of love.

Batya:
Uh huh!

Merav:
Like that's not explicit. It's kind-of there in the margins.

Batya:
He puts on the kittel to say, "it's Pesach now", and he comes to the sick room to say, "it's Pesach here now too".

Merav:
Right, exactly. It's like he's distributing it into the sick room. And they leave the door open so that the girls can hear the *seder* because Papa's going to chant in Hebrew. They don't have *haggadahs* in the bedroom, which I thought was interesting, but probably because it's dark.

Batya:
Oh, of course.

Merav:

Right. They're probably sitting in the dark because they can't have the light on all of *yontif*. They're not going to leave it on. I don't even think there are lights. Right? There's no electric lights in the apartment.

Batya:

There aren't electric lights, there are lamps.

Merav:

So I don't know if they have a lamp or not, but they're sitting there. They're getting just the audio. Right, something we're very familiar with from COVID is, okay, "I can't see you on the video, but I have the audio. I'll be able to listen to you." So that's how much *seder* the girls can have.

Batya:

And this is an advantage of the house being so small is that they're not that far away. They can hear just with the door left open.

Rena:

And I find it very interesting that they invite, not this year, that they're sick, but other years they invite all who are hungry to come and eat. So they invite poor people to their house and they themselves are not well off. They don't have a lot of money and they don't have much to spare, but yet they do the mitzvah of inviting poor people into their home to feed them.

Shoshana:

Whatever resources they do have, which are very limited, they do put a lot of them into Passover. They have like what's described as shiny crystal goblets. They have the *kittel*. They're either buying matzah or making matzah. They're buying wine, and presumably they do that for Shabbat as well. I don't know if

any of these artifacts were brought over from the old country. It seems like it is important to them to make sure that they have enough for Passover.

Merav:

Yeah, absolutely.

Rena:

And they also have two sets of dishes for Passover.

Batya:

Yep.

Rena:

Which is kind of unusual. I know my parents, and my father and his whole family, including Shoshana's grandmother, they didn't have a lot, so they only had one set of dishes for Passover. Two sets for every day, but only one set for Passover, which was the meat, because that's

what they ate more of. So they wouldn't have any of the dairy foods. They were probably too expensive anyway.

Batya:

A thing that I really started being aware of when I had my own household, because you tend not to think very much about how your parents manage until you have to manage the same things, is that one thing about keeping extra sets of Passover dishes. It's not just the expense of owning the dishes. It's the expense of having enough space to store them.

Merav:

Yes.

Batya:

And especially in New York where space is at a premium, that's a significant consideration. Where would you put them if you had them?

Rena:

So where do they put all these extra dishes in this tiny little kitchen?

Merav:

Mama describes them being – she says they're in a dish barrel, which presumably either is stored up near the ceiling or is potentially in the basement. Like if they have any space like we have today in New York City where you have storage spaces, we never get a reference to that. So I'm going to say it's that – maybe Mama throws a doily over it.

Batya:

It could be under a table. It could be behind a bed or could be under a bed if it's a thing you can safely tip on its side, I don't know.

Merav:

I don't know where they keep it, but clearly this is something that they have just for Passover

because she's telling Charlotte, okay, put the dishes back in the barrel. We have bigger problems now. They still get brought out for Passover, but not until the last minute.

Rena:

They also have dishes for the company.

Batya:

A, they're not a small family. B, they expect to feed a lot of guests.

Merav:

Yeah. We don't know what percentage of the relatives are going to come over for Passover because they don't. If the Purim chapter is anything to judge by, it's a substantial crowd.

Batya:

It's huge.

Merav:

So they probably invite just the closest relatives, but we don't know because that's the year it didn't happen.

Batya:

This bit breaks my heart actually for more than one reason. Gertie saying the four questions from her sickbed purely in itself. That's a heartbreaking moment. She's practiced for weeks and I remember being little and learning the four questions. That was going to be your moment to shine because the youngest child, spoiler, I'm not the youngest child in my family, but there was a short period where I was the youngest one who could recite them. And traditionally, the four questions, which we will probably talk a little bit about what those questions are, traditionally recited by the youngest child in my family, first, my older brother, and then I were apparently very reluctant to give up our spotlight moment of reading the Four Questions. So the tradition

that developed was every child would say the Four Questions in order from youngest to oldest.

Merav:

Like sequentially?

Shoshana:

And you finished before midnight?

Batya:

Sorry, Shoshana?

Shoshana:

And you still managed to finish your *seder* before midnight?

Batya:

We did! And to keep it from getting too boring, we would start learning different ways to do it, different tunes to sing it, into different languages. We learned it in Yiddish one year.

We got the Ladino version of it. Ladino, for those of you not in the know, is a Judeo-Spanish language, which is heavily, heavily Spanish in much the way that Yiddish is heavily, heavily German, leavened with – possibly the bad choice of words here – cut with generous amounts of Hebrew and having sort of different developments over the years. My parents drew the line of the year I got it translated into Klingon.

Shoshana:

Why? That's great.

Batya:

They did not feel it was appropriate for actually delivering at the Seder. I was mildly miffed. They let me do it in Latin, though, so...

Merav:

So classical languages are okay if they come from this planet?

Batya:

But yeah, here's Gertie who can't get out of bed and come to the table, but she is going to deliver the four questions.

Shoshana:

I was sure that Henny was going to get stuck delivering them and roll her eyes at having to do these babyish four questions. But yes, I agree, Gertie doing them from her bed is just the most heartbreaking thing.

Merav:

Well, it's not quite as heartbreaking as what I'm about to say, which is that people died from scarlet fever.

Batya: It's true.

Merav:

The fact that the girls all survived this episode is amazing.

Batya:

It's miraculous.

Merav:

It reminds me of the fact that A, Passover season of miracles, but B there's an Isaac Batshevis Singer short story called *The Extinguished Lights*, which some of you might know where a little girl dies right before *Hanukkah*

Batya:

Yes!

Merav:

and is haunting the entire town because she didn't get to light candles and play *dreidel* one last time. She's like five or six.

Rena:

Aww.

Merav:

When I see Gertie saying the four questions. I think of the little girl and, spoiler, they wind up at her grave playing *dreidel* and frying *latkes* and what have you.

Rena:

Aww. So sad.

Merav:

And her ghost is then pacified and moves on. This is an era where child loss from these kinds of diseases was absolutely common. It would have been a very different narrative if that had happened.

Batya:

Yeah,

Shoshana:

And that is a good point. And I did wonder about – this chapter has so much humor with Henny being jealous that “some people have all the luck and they get to be sick.” There must have been the awareness that this risk did exist. I’m – was it really this light? Did they just know that their cases weren’t that serious? Or was this an editorial choice just to keep it light, to keep this sort of a chapter that wasn’t gonna bring down the room?

Rena:

Yeah, and then during the *seder*, reading about the angel of death, and here they are, very sick and escaping.

Merav:

And I think Mama actually says that to Charlotte or Gertie.

Batya:

It's to Gertie early on.

Merav:

And Gertie's, well, "what are we talking about here? And why is it called Passover?" And Mama tells the story of how the angel of death passed over the houses of the Jews in Egypt because they had marked the, I don't think she actually goes as far as to say that they had marked the lintels of the doors with blood because that would be a little bit much to say to a four year old. And as a result, we have this narrative of the angel of death passing over a Jewish house, which is pretty much what happens in this chapter.

Batya:

Which is what happened.

Merav:

They're kept safe potentially because of Mama's fastidiousness, which is related to her

Jewishness and all of the rituals that we see here.

Batya:

Yeah. So we also have, in addition to not being able to be at the table to say the four questions, Gertie also has missed her chance to steal the *afikomen*. And I felt that.

Merav:

I don't think we covered what an *afikomen* is. There are three ritual pieces of matzah, which is the flat unleavened bread that we eat at Passover. And those go into a special, in this case, they actually go on the seder plate, which I thought was really interesting because ours are separate. Modern seder plates don't have a spot for the matzah. We have a cover. We just put them into the cover, which has three slots like record albums would have.

Batya:

A little bit like

Merav:

little sleeves.

Batya:

A handmade matzah is about – roughly the size and shape of a vinyl record.

Merav:

And so the middle matzah gets broken in half ritually, and one half of it is handed around and eaten, and the other half is saved as the afikoman. The afikoman is dessert. The dessert is hidden from the children by the father or hidden from the person leading the seder by the children, right? They can mischievously take off with it and hide it, and then they ransom it back. So Gertie has had a clear shot at the ransom this year.

Batya:

For the first time in her life, 'cause she's five.

Merav:

Not even five, I think four.

Batya:

Four? She's four.

Merav:

She has really been looking forward to doing the hiding and the taking and the ransoming and getting a toy. And Henny has her back. Henny's like, it's okay. I'm going to get the *afikomen* for you. I'm gonna hide it and Papa's not getting it back until he gives us both a present.

Batya:

And it's clear that what Gertie wanted was not so, well, she says "now I won't get a present," but it's also clear that she wanted a chance at the stealing. I really have to respect the older

girls for all agreeing to let the youngest have her shot because competition for who gets to steal the *afikomen*, who gets there first, or who steals it from someone else was always very fierce in my family, because it wasn't just me and my siblings, it was frequently also my cousins.

Merav:

Yes.

Batya:

There was this whole little swarm of us running around. I genuinely don't know if we would have been so supportive and giving and say, we're gonna let the youngest have her go.

Shoshana:

Especially when there's not that much of an age difference. I mean, it's not like they're all in their teens or something. Charlotte is six if Gertie is four.

Batya:

But they all promised they would let her. This has been discussed. That's that sister solidarity again. Sister solidarity, love that. And yes, this is not the first time we've seen it and it won't be the last.

Rena:

You can almost feel her disappointment. How immense it must be not being able to do this.

Merav:

You have to wait a whole year.

Batya:

And Henny is like, I will at least be sure that you get a present. I'm going to hold this for ransom for both of us. Not, mind you, for Gertie instead of her, but for both of them.

Merav:

Well, she has to do the legwork.

Shoshana:

Well, Papa's not going to say no, and she knows that.

Batya:

Henny's altruism only goes so far. I have said before in previous episodes that one of the things I really like about Henny is how she's giving, she's generous, she's also selfish.

Those are both impulses she has and getting to see those two very real, very strong impulses at war in her is always interesting. Also, I love how great a sense of humor Papa has about this.

Like, “well, it looks like I'm being held up”. He's completely behind this and I love it.

Shoshana:

You need a sense of humor to lead a *seder*.

Merav:

You really do. Because everyone's interrupting you the whole time. Hard to keep a *seder* under control. Especially with lots of little kids. This is probably the easiest *seder* Papa's has had in years.

Batya:
It's true.

Shoshana:
It's probably true.

Rena:
And the quietest.

Shoshana:
The hardest one Mama's had, but the easiest one Papa's had.

Merav:
But I bet it's a little bit lonely for Papa too.

Batya:

Also that. But yeah, it really does take a strong-willed and charismatic person to keep a *seder* on track. I don't know if it's Papa or Mama or in concert who manages it most years, but this year, as you say, a lot easier.

Merav:

I think there are some very interesting storytelling choices made on the way to creating this chapter. We get a bunch of different info dumps from Mama to Gertie predominantly because Gertie is the one in the kitchen with her. And we get the setup as a Gertie-focused chapter, but it kind of then goes all over the place to the different sisters. But Gertie is the one who keeps getting the Passover download from her mother because she doesn't know because she's only four and prior to now she hasn't really paid attention. And so Mama gets to diegetically explain what's going on with the holiday to a small child, which

we haven't really seen before. Like we haven't seen that – the use of that as much. You could have used that in every chapter, but they didn't do that.

Because there is so much to tell about Passover, there are five separate times where we have kind of a “What's this about? What's that about?” and it moves from being Mama telling Gertie to being in the narrator voice of the chapter telling us what's gonna happen next.

Batya:

It is interesting and it's also, once again, very thematic because the entire central theme of the *seder* is it's based on a line in scripture. “Tell your children on that day, this is what God did for me when I came out of Egypt,” because the idea is that in each generation, you're supposed to see it as though you yourself were brought out of Egypt and you're telling your kids about

how it happened. The entire *haggadah*, the entire *seder* grew up out of that practice, which is what the four questions are doing there. The kid asks, “why is this night different from all nights?” And lists four specific things that we are doing differently today than we usually do. The answer for why is this night different is “we were slaves in Egypt and God took us out and that's why we're doing all of this” and we're gonna tell that story. So Gertie asking “what's this all about?” and Mama telling her, “well, you see, this is what happened and this is why we're doing it” is 100% what *pesach* and the *pesach seder* is about.

It's what, writ small, what we're doing here. And I love that.

Merav

So Mama is already – she's fulfilled her purpose for Passover, even before the holiday begins, by explaining to Gertie what's going to happen,

and thereby by explaining to us – and what's interesting about what you were saying about Passover and the liberation, right? We were being...

Batya:

Mm hm!

Merav:

– we were slaves in Egypt, and then we were brought forth. At the end of the chapter, the Board of Health shows up and they are free to go out of the house.

Batya:

Yes!

Merav:

So that's definitely a little bit of a weird parallel, but it's definitely there in the structure of the chapter.

So we have a ton of detail in this chapter because it's really, it's one of the longer ones. We get like the details of the girls getting sick, like when they get the red spots on their faces, Sarah turns first and then Ella gets spots around her ears and on her forehead and they think it's funny, but like that's gotta be terrifying for their parents –

Batya:
Yeah.

Merav
– to see the signs of the illness on their faces. And of course, Passover's got that whole blood theme.

Batya:
Oh yes.

Merav:
So, you know, the blood coming into your face,

right? There's another weird parallel, so there's definitely a lot of that going on in the background. And we also get Sarah's dream, which in any other chapter would be like a central point. But in this chapter, there's so much else going on that it's just, you know, Sarah's got a fever.

Ella says the word delirious, right? She's 12, right? She's clearly reading at like, a high school or college level, because we see her diving into Dickens earlier on. She's the one who says, "oh she's delirious". She knows what that word is. She knows what it means enough to say it waking out of a dead sleep, while sick, to say 'delirious'. So I just think that's great characterization.

Shoshana:

Was illness common enough at the time that she'd encountered other people talking about being delirious before?

Batya:

I was really struck by what happens in Sarah's delirium nightmare is that she feels something swelling, getting bigger, then she feels that she herself is swelling and getting bigger. And this struck me as familiar and I realized what it was reminding me of. Once again, as I have done many times during this podcast so far, I can see your face, I can see your face, you're remembering it. It's in one of the later books in the, one of the middle books actually, in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House books, there is a point where the entire family gets malaria. They don't know the word malaria. They fever and, how do you pronounce the word? A-G-U-E, how do you say that word?

Merav:

Ogg.

Batya:

Ogg, that sounds right, but fever and ague is what they call it. The last line of the chapter about that says, "No one knew at that time that fever and ague was malaria and that some mosquitoes give it to people when they bite them." So there's much older Laura filling in an important piece of information that none of them at the time had.

Merav:

I learned the word ague from that chapter.

Batya:

Laura at one point in her delirium, in her fever, hallucinates something getting bigger and bigger and swelling and swelling and she can't stop it. And then it is getting smaller and smaller and smaller and shrinking until it's the smallest that anything ever was. And I think she also hears a voice jabbering very quickly and a voice drawling very slowly and she can't make out anything that they're saying. It's interesting to

me that both of these little girls under the influence of a fever have a dream about something swelling and I have no idea what would cause that.

Merav:

I wonder if it's sinus pressure or maybe a feeling of not being able to breathe like something is pressing down on you like you – it's definitely interesting that those dreams are so parallel and Sarah has Mama to hold her hand which I think is you know as we said in other chapters Mama is definitely depicted as a very doting mother. She's deliberately sleeping in that room so that when “the fever mounts”, which is another phrase I learned from this chapter, she can be there to comfort them and, you know, just to keep them getting maximal rest.

Shoshana:

That moment struck me as the most that the

chapter admits how serious this is. Like, that's definitely a scary moment, even if most of the time we've just got these girls, they're sick, it's kind of annoying, here, you're scared for Sarah.

Merav:

It says during the day they play and they joke, but at night the fevers mount and the real nursing is being done and Mama doesn't sleep very much.

Rena:

Well, anytime you're sick, it's always worse at night.

Batya:

For a lot of people.

Rena:

Yeah, they have a higher fever.

Merav:

We also have just kind of the little characterizations of the girls as they react to the presents that they receive. Charlie brings a series of presents and (is) like, spending money on them. I mean, obviously a lot of the stuff doesn't cost a huge amount of money, but to them, this is treasure, right? Charlie is bringing them a new treasure every couple of days. And so in addition to the whole, everything's happening, we have this false conclusion in the center where it looks like Ella and Sarah are going to get better. And then oops, Charlotte and Gertie are sick too. They're brought into the sick room. And then all of the efforts redouble. Now we have two more sick girls, we have to be more careful. The inciting spot where it's like, all right, now everything kicks up to 11 and we have to really worry about it. The sick people versus the well people.

There's that separation and the well people are doing all this work and the sick people are lying

in bed and getting packages. Which brings us to Miss Allen.

Batya:

Last page of the chapter, we get a gift sent through the mail. They've never gotten anything for them through the mail before.

Merav:

Which is sort of hard to believe with modern sensibilities like we all had magazine subscriptions as kids but they have so little their library lady has purchased them a copy of a magazine and they are thrilled. This is the best thing ever, and also I'm just thinking about the fact that it's a picture magazine which is what she knows Gertie can read, so this is an all levels gift.

Batya:

Ah! I didn't realize it was a picture magazine. It says the St. Nicholas Magazine, but I do not know much about that. Do you?

Merav:

Reasonably certain it had nice illustrations at the very least.

Batya:

What a delightful thing. She knows they've been sick. They haven't been to the library. I wonder who it was who told her they were sick because no one from the family could have told her. She must have found out through the neighborhood grapevine. What's up with the Brenner girls? Why haven't I seen them?

Merav:

Or possibly this is where the kid network comes in, right? We know that Tilly goes to the library.

Batya:

Oh you know, could be. Other kids coming to the library, she might ask them.

Merav:

It's very possible that the kid network fills in Miss Allen, who immediately flies into action and sends them a present because she's like, "my girls are not here!"

Shoshana:

I found it also interesting that the outside world, and like we were talking about American culture earlier, it seems like a lot of goodies from the outside world come specifically from the two benevolent non-Jews in their lives, who at this point, as far as we know, are unconnected to each other.

Merav:

Foreshadowing!

Shoshana:

I know, that's all I'll say.

Merav:

This is, again, shaping the characters of these two Gentiles who are at polar ends of their lives as the Library Lady and there's Charlie, who's Papa's best friend. We definitely see Charlie's integration into the family with the Purim chapter and now with this one. Presumably Charlie would be at *seder*. So we –

Batya: Most likely, yeah.

Merav:

We don't know, but he definitely – he shows up for *Purim*. So maybe he shows up for *seder* too. Certainly he is aware of how much stress it's going to put on Mama to make Passover by herself.

Shoshana:

He's missing out on some kugel this year.

Batya:

He gets it later. It's all right.

Shoshana:

I know. He specifically says potato pudding, right?

Merav:

Kugel is definitely a favorite with Charlie as we see in another chapter. I think that we've kind of gone through most of the action. I did notice a couple of little, like, ritual things during the seder. One of my personal favorites is the girls picturing Elijah.

Batya:

Yes!

Merav:

For those who don't know in our audience, the prophet Elijah frequently shows up at ritual

events in Judaism. He was said to have been bodily carried into heaven in a chariot of fire and he is not technically speaking dead. So he just kind of shows up at things like a family member.

So if you're circumcising your child who is male, you are going to have the prophet Elijah have a special chair at a circumcision, you set aside a chair at some households for Passover if you got enough room for Elijah and you put out a cup of wine for Elijah. And that is the ritual the girls are really itching to see. They want to see “is the wine going to go down when Elijah flies in?” I was really struck by the idea that Elijah has wings because I've never seen a depiction of Elijah with wings anywhere other than here.

Batya:

I have occasionally. I've seen to my mind very odd depictions of Elijah that don't match ones that I was raised with. But nonetheless, I've

seen Elijah depicted with wings, which I suppose explains how he manages to visit every *seder* around the world in one night. You know, he doesn't get a sleigh, he gets wings. He could fly by himself. And another one which really struck me as strange was Elijah depicted as half-translucent.

Merav:

That's interesting.

Batya:

Because he's here as a spirit, he's not here in body. So to show that we draw him translucent so you can see the street outside through him. Most depictions of him I've seen have just been an elderly, rather dignified, sometimes kind of shabby looking man because Elijah is frequently depicted as shabby because you know "that beggar on the street might be Elijah in disguise." That comes into a later book, doesn't it?

Merav: I think it does.

Batya:

Not going to get into that right now. But the idea that Elijah has wings is, I agree, rare and very interesting.

Merav:

And we have Papa, right on the heels of the girls talking about Elijah coming in, reporting back to the girls that the level of the wine in the glass has definitely come down so that they don't feel the need to come in and see, of course they shouldn't be getting out of bed, but Papa is humoring them and keeping up the tradition that Elijah absolutely came to their seder and drank some of the wine.

It's not a full Seder without singing. There is some singing in the ritual parts, but Mama is practical here. And this is very similar to Mama

enforcing bedtime. The Seder goes very late, especially for these girls who usually go to bed at seven or eight o'clock at night. Mama is making sure that they're going to get enough rest. So she and Henny are going to pick up. Papa's just led an entire *seder* and the two of them are going to clean up and there's not going to be any singing so that the other girls can rest. We are denied the folk songs.

Batya:

It feels a bit like the chapter should end with the end of the seder, but there's a little bit when Passover is over, there's just a little bit further after that. There's an Afikomen, if you like.

Merav:

Yes!

Batya:

There's the dessert after the seder is over.

Merav:

Very good.

Batya:

More gifts from Charlie and the magazine from Miss Allen. Then Passover is over. Things get a little easier, but they're still very happy when "it's a happy and thankful group that hailed the inspector from the Board of Health."

Merav and Batya:

That's such a great line.

Shoshana:

They must have felt the need to have that closure line, because I agree, the chapter feels like it has a natural end at the end of the *seder*, but they must have felt that you have to show it. And then they got better, really.

Merav:

Because, I mean, imagine you're reading this as a child and your parents are reading it to you, and I think we all may have stolen the book and read ahead.

Batya:

Oh, for sure.

Merav:

But ultimately, if you're left in suspense in the dark, bedtime story, and you're thinking, "my God, do they die? Do any of the children die?" I was definitely that kid. Like I read *The Borrowers* for about 10 minutes and we got to the part where his father had died in the war and I quit. It was a death. And I was like, "nope, nope, nope. Reading a different book now." And I was very skittish about death as a kid. And if even a whiff of death had been in, if there had been any suspense, I would have definitely stayed up all night and been frantic.

Batya:

Gotta finish the chapter. Gotta know if they get out of this okay.

Merav:

I think it's a kindness to the reader putting a cap on it and saying it's gonna be alright.

Batya:

This is on the whole a very kind book – series that, it does not want you to suffer as a reader. It wants to comfort you. It wants to charm you. It does not want to throw acid all over your emotions.

Shoshana:

It also wants to explain things to you. Like you should always know what's going on.

Batya:

Yes, it wants to explain things to you, which is extremely Jewish.

Merav:

There's a whole bit where Mama and Charlie are talking and she says, "we wish we knew how to repay you." Leaning on Charlie during this time, he's kind of parenting in a way from outside by sending things by helping. The first thing he asks Mama is, "can I bring you groceries." You get the sense that Charlie is very much helping them parent the girls because there's a crisis and foreshadowing for future chapters that they're like, we don't know how we can repay you. And then eventually it's this family that gives him the happiness he needs.

Batya:

We get just a little more, very briefly, of Ella's continuing crush on Charlie. "Isn't he kind and thoughtful?" That is appreciation and gratitude. And it's also, "Charlie is one of the best men in the world."

Merav:

If you're following the narrative, he kind-of is.

Batya:

He absolutely is. Ella is not wrong.

Merav:

She has a good eye.

Shoshana:

He's not just a handsome guy who's nearby.
He's also a very – he's worthy of admiration.

Merav:

I mean, Ella doesn't have a crush on
Picklenose. She has a crush on Charlie.

Batya:

Picklenose is probably a good guy too.

Shoshana:

Sure.

Batya:

But he's not pretty like Charlie is.

Merav:

That is another factor.

Batya:

And also he is not showing up when he knows that Papa's kids are sick.

Merav:

There's definitely a solidarity with Charlie. And it's interesting that it's Charlie and not one of Papa's brothers who's doing all of this, because we do absolutely know that Papa has brothers in the city because we meet them in the *Purim* chapter.

Rena:

He's more of an uncle to them than their actual uncles.

Batya:

We do know that the various other uncles and aunts are helping, they're bringing things, but that's not what the chapter focuses on. We are more interested in the fact that Charlie, who isn't family, is acting like family than we are interested in the actual family that's acting like family.

Merav:

It's almost an afterthought in the chapter, but Charlie's kindness is standing out because he's an outsider, he's a gentile, and he still has this warm familial feeling towards these girls. And so does Miss Allen. Those are two things that become sort of remarkable as we progress in that plotline. I think we've pretty much covered everything in the chapter, which is amazing

because this chapter is enormous comparatively to some of the earlier chapters.

Batya:

I think part of that is – more is on the page than usual. So we don't have to dig it out. It's all right there.

Merav:

Bits and pieces that we would otherwise have to extrapolate are actually in the book for a change.

Shoshana:

We covered many things.

Merav:

We're going to say goodbye to Shoshana and Rena. Shoshana, where can we find you on the internet and what are you working on?

Shoshana:

You can find me at shoshanaflax.com and there you'll find Parodies for Charities, which is my little side gig where if you donate to a charity, I will write you a silly song, a song parody or something along those lines.

Batya:

That's fantastic!

Shoshana:

And then The Horn Book is hbook.com and that again is a series of publications about children's and young adult books, including a magazine that comes out six times a year, including book reviews.

Merav:

Thank you. And we're going to say also goodbye to Rena. Rena, where can we find you and what are you working on?

Rena:

I'm on social media and I don't have any projects right now.

Merav:

Okay, so look for Rena Mills on social media. Rena, are you on the Camp Cejwin alumni Facebook group?

Rena:

Yes, I am.

Merav:

I will probably see you there. I'm Merav Hoffman.

Batya:

And I'm Batya Wittenberg, and we're really glad you're here.

Tune in next time when we'll hear Papa say, "Put it down. I don't want the American flag on the floor."

Closing music

Batya:

Our opening theme music is the public domain Dill Pickles Rag, performed here by Arthur Pryor's Band, courtesy of the Internet Archive. Our closing theme music is the La Sirene Waltz, also in the public domain, written by Pietro Deiro, performed here by Daniel Gunderson and Sunnie Larsen. All-of-a-Kind Podcast's logo is by Al Benbow. Please see our full production credits on our website at <https://all-of-a-kind-podcast.com>.